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THE ROLE OF THE TWO-YEAR COLLEGE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT CHAIRMAN.

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THOUGH THE PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITIES OF TWO- AND FOUR-YEAR ENGLISH DEPARTMENT CHAIRMEN ARE SIMILAR, THE TWO-YEAR CHAIRMAN MUST FACE SOME CHALLENGES AND DIFFICULTIES WHICH ARE UNIQUELY HIS. BECAUSE OF HEAVIER FACULTY LOADS AND THE LACK OF TEACHING ASSISTANTS, THE TWO-YEAR CHAIRMAN'S PRIME ADMINISTRATIVE RESPONSIBILITIES TO HIS STAFF ARE TO DECREASE WORK LOADS TO PROVIDE EQUITABLE SCHEDULING. HE MUST ALSO CARRY OUT ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURES, CONSTANTLY DEFEND THE ENGLISH CURRICULUM, AND, WITH THE AID OF DEPARTMENT MEMBERS, UP-DATE AND REVISE COURSES FOR STUDENTS WITH CONSTANTLY SHIFTING BACKGROUNDS. TO THE STUDENTS HE IS RESPONSIBLE FOR GIVING THE ENCOURAGEMENT AND ADVICE ESPECIALLY NEEDED BY TWO-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO ARE OFTEN "WOEFULLY BEHIND" AND UNSURE OF THEIR GOALS. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "THE ADE BULLETIN," NUMBER 12, JANUARY 1967, PAGES 5-8. (BN)

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## THE ROLE OF THE TWO-YEAR COLLEGE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT CHAIRMAN

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In many ways the task of the two-year college English department chairman probably differs little from the task of the four-year college or university English department chairman. Each sincerely feels that he is responsible for the curricular subject area primarily and basically most important to the college student. Such a feeling is not presumptuous or improbable; unless a student can communicate his thoughts to his peers and his instructors, and later to his fellow-workers and colleagues, he connot succeed along the paths most of us know and which most students follow. The primary responsiblity, then, in either a two or four-year college, of an English department chairman should be to do one's best to insure that the teaching of composition and literature, of humanities and speech, be pursued with as competent and contemporary means as is humanely possible in one's own educational situation. The primary duty of any English department chairman mainly involves this one pervading trust and responsibility; of course, each department chairman, beset by varying traumas and difficulties, will function as best he can to overcome differing and sometimes unique problems and frustrations. Probably in the nature of these challenges and difficulties the two-year chairman finds himself working and sometimes fighting along different lines from the four-year or university chairman.

I. The immediate and most obvious discrepancy between the two and four-year college is the faculty member's load. While high school teachers feel that a two-year college is paradise, four-year instructors consider our schedules cruel and impossible. Most two-year colleges do not demand research and annual publishing, and administrators are apt to justify the frequently crushing two-year college loads with this facile reminder. Actually, the two-year college English instructor is in the most difficult of educational midlands. Fortunately, discipline is hardly ever involved, but he is attempting to prompt and inspire, for many of his students, the first genuine lift to expressive maturity, a hope ably abetted by students woefully behind but now desperate to learn. The instructor is also determined to keep his transfer students performing on a university level, writing their 8-10,000 words a semester in 1A and 1B, and reading and writing extensively in sophomore courses. The objective, machine-graded examination does not substantially exist in this picture. The two-year college instructor is usually demanding more exacting work of the student than was ever demanded of him in high school, expecting him to work toward or on the four-year level, and the instructor's load may unfortunately be five classes per semester with from 30 to 35 students per class. When one also realizes that three preparations are usually involved and that no teaching assistants are available, he can easily understand what a crushing load faces the conscientious teacher of English in the two-year college.

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Instructors in other disciplines would naturally be reluctant to admit that teachers of English work harder, but the fact remains that the teaching and guiding of the writing process is like no other college instructional task. Although it is very difficult to prepare one's first semester in any discipline even if all examinations are machine-graded, the fact remains that such a course is "safe" for several semesters, the papers are effortlessly graded, and few if any weekly essays must be laboriously marked and rewritten at the rate of three or four per hour, or eight to ten hours per week per writing class. Such a prospect continually faces the English instructor, and after the marking and rewriting comes the necessarily high number of individual interviews for added explanations and answers, most of them shaded and varied. Administrators who have never taught the subject can seldom understand the overbearing pressure of such a heavy and constant obligation. The decreasing of load, then, and equitable and compassionate scheduling, would appear to me to be the prime administrative responsibility of any two-year English department chairman.

I have purposely placed second another important factor influencing department morale--salary--for two reasons. Because salary is equally important to all members of the faculty, it will receive equal enthusiasm from all department heads. More important, salary is not as important in the English department as load. One should mention here, however, that for two reasons English instructors are more dependent upon their salaries than are the members of many other departments. First, the amount of school work necessary outside class hours usually prevents much, if any, outside work. Second, the English teacher does not enjoy the same outside demand as the accountant, engineer, chemist or physicist.

These two factors then--load and salary--generally deserve a chairman's most constant efforts. The chairman must, however, consider a multitude of concommittant duties if he is to keep the morale of his department as high as possible.

The chairman of a two-year English department, particularly of a small department, finds himself constantly defending the English curriculum--against influences too numerous and unpolitic to mention. If the chairman fortunately has a large department, he may gain curricular support from aligned colleagues and particularly from departmental committees. By their work in these voluntary curriculum committees English instructors most frequently and generously make their greatest contribution to the department, and one of the chairman's most exacting tasks involves the judicious appointments to and relief from these committees. Many two-year colleges do not allow "released time" for the routine updating and revision of existing courses, but from those in the department most interested in a course's constant effectiveness and most receptive and effectively critical of their colleagues' suggestions will evolve the chairman's best assurance and insurance that the courses offered by the department continue to be vital and rewarding. The ever-increasing variety of texts continually available and the constantly shifting backgrounds and capabilities of the two-year college student demand that courses be under constant review and question. The most informed, conscientious and cooperative members of a department are the best means to execute such a process.

In other ways the two-year English department chairman is more immediately involved with administration than his four-year counter-part. In a college where there is possibly not the advisory information available he would desire, the chairman must learn the "ins and outs" of his own college budgetary vagaries, and how frustrating and diappointing they can be. This same chairman must attempt, frequently with very little secretarial help, to keep communications streaming from an office frequently cramped, unprivate and inadequate. Announcements must go out; reports must come in; information must be kept moving both ways between the administration and faculty; the ditto masters must not run out; the typewriters must be kept in repair. The best possible substitute instructors must be found to replace instructors who, though ill, would keep tottering to class rather than suffer the greater illness of feeling that their students were not continuing to work and learn.

Along with these duties, and the job of his own teaching, the chairman must try to read, not only in his own specialized subject field but also in the field of English education in the

two-year college, to keep informed of new ideas and techniques, and to pass these along to proper members of his department. He meets personnel problems as they arise, finds himself the immediate, involved interlocutor between the instructor and administration, and he deals with these unpredictable, sometimes saddening, occasionally humorous problems as best he can. He replies to applicants for teaching positions and is responsible for maintaining the processes by which instructors are hired. The chairman appreciates the varied benefits of the library, maintains a close liaison with the librarian, and encourages his department constantly to do likewise. The chairman attends as many conferences as he can and encourages his department to do the same; he tries in a multitude of ways to find expense money for these conferences. The chairman tries, usually with little stenographic help, to keep the department files current, so that a sabbatical, sick leave, or rotation of the chairmanship can be effected with some continuity. Finally, and especially in smaller districts, the chairman assumes a certain social sponsoring function for the newer department members and attempts, with the help of all members, to support the department's group spirit.

In attempting to carry out the many optimistically stated responsibilities outlined above, the chairman is most concerned with the general morale of his department, without which, of course, he can enjoy no morale of his own.

II. The chairman's responsibility to the students in a two-year college is also quite real and particularly immediate. In my college any student desiring to drop or change any English course must see the chairman for approval. Although such a rule involves an unbelievable expenditure of time, I am glad for several reasons that such a rule exists. We do not allow students to drop required courses, nor do we allow students to drop <u>any</u> English course after a certain date. The reasons for these rules must be explained as carefully and as considerately as possible, and as many times as is necessary. However, much more important than this nearly mechanical duty is the function of offering the comfort and assurance that the two-year college students particularly need. The vast majority still live at home; they are fresh from high school and still associating, many of them, with the same group they have always known; some of them did not definitely know a year ago that they would be attending college; many of them are as yet unsure of their capabilities; almost all of them, when unsure of their chances of success in a particular course, especially need and appreciate the reassurance and encouragement of someone other than their instructor. Of course, with <u>some</u> students, the sooner they drop a course the better; the sooner they leave college the better; but I am not speaking of these. I refer to the student who, though encouraged by his instructor, still needs the added encouragement of another member of the department, in this case the chairman.

Of course, when students come to drop courses, they sometimes offer valuable if unwelcome information. Occasionally, if a critical trend seems to develop, the chairman's conversations with the students may present an opportunity and responsibility to discuss possible shortcomings with an instructor. I say "occasionally;" perhaps I should say, "once in a great while." In the first place, students are a uniformly loyal lot, and possibly those most deserving and disgruntled most effectively rationalize their discontent and deficiencies. However, if student opinion is carefully evaluated, I feel this opinion can be frequently relayed to the instructor as praise, and "once in a great while" as corrective suggestion.

Almost equally important to the benefits described above would be the one great and necessary reward the chairman himself receives. Through these contacts, and his own class load, the chairman maintains his touch with the students, to whom the instructors and administration should address their constant and best efforts. We have all seen, in various educational situations, how quickly practice can shift to theory, how easily the real can become the unreal. Unless the chairman keeps informed by teaching varied classes and seeing varied students, he will not be able to evaluate his instructors' curricular suggestions nor will he be able accurately and effectively to represent to the administration the students he and his instructors are attempting to teach. History, some of it very recent, is not kind to colleges that have lost touch with the needs and ideas of the students, for whom the college ostensibly exists.

III. In his responsibilities to his administration the duties of English chairman in the two-year college are closest to those of the four-year college. In the latter, I should imagine, as is certainly true in the former, the chairman finds himself not an administrator, really no longer a full instructor, but smack between the two. He has responsibilities in both directions and must filter and communicate the desires of each to the other. When demands are going in each direction, the shrapnel becomes thickest, and the chairman's decision to compromise or not to compromise becomes most crucial. In such combat, wounds can be serious and confrontation deadly, and the wreckage on the battlefield is seldom completely cleared away.

If such a situation had frequently been my lot as chairman, I should have sometime ago returned to a full teaching load. However, with no intention of a sop whatsoever, I should like to state that a cooperative administration and a generous, understanding English faculty have made, in my case, a most difficult job into a frequent joy. Such an administration, such an English department, and a student body that is varied, questioning, and energetic, suggest the only three reasons why a two-year English department chairman would ever have the nerve, stupidity, and optimism to accept his responsibility.

Editor's note: Professor Snepp, who has taught at City College for eighteen years, headed a department of fifty teachers. City College has a daytime enrollment of 9,000 and an evening enrollment of 2,500.

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